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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

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MEMORANDUM

TO : CA - Miss Watson

FROM : PA - Hodding Carter III

Press Comment on the Department's Role in Jonestown

Summary

The mass suicides and murders in Jonestown constituted the most widely known news story of 1978, according to a recent Gallup poll. Ninety-eight percent of those interviewed said they had heard or read about the events. According to Gallup, the awareness of Jonestown matched public awareness of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Despite the widespread publicity, there were relatively few editorials or columns that commented specifically on the Department's role in Jonestown and on its responsibility toward U.S. citizens abroad.

Of the 65 newspapers PA regularly monitors, we received editorials from 20 newspapers and three columns over the past two months that discussed two aspects of the Department's role: (1) the Department's responsiveness to complaints about the situation in Jonestown and its responsibility for the welfare of Americans abroad; and (2) the responsibility taken for removing the bodies from Jonestown and who should bear the cost.

Twelve comments either were critical of how Department officers handled the adverse reports about the People's Temple or at least raised questions about the Department's performance. Eight comments took the position that the Department had done all it legally could do.

All six editorials that commented on the cleanup operation favored the action that was taken. But four of these comments also suggested that the Government seek to recover the costs of returning the bodies.

End Summary

Positions of Individual Newspapers

Responsiveness Prior to Deaths

The following columnists and papers took the position that the Department should have done more and should review its procedures and policies:

James Reston, William Randolph Hearst, Jr., Des Moines Register, New York Post, Long Island Newsday, Tulsa Tribune, Boston Christian Science Monitor, Rochester Times-Union, Salt Lake City Tribune, Baltimore News American, Washington Post, and San Francisco Chronicle.

Sentiments typical of this group were expressed by:

James Reston, New York Times, December 3:
"There are some questions for the executive branch of the Government--why was it not more vigilant in looking after the well-being of its citizens?...But it would still be dicey to draw general conclusions from so many ambiguous human considerations."

William Randolph Hearst, Jr., Baltimore News-American, December 10:
"In other words, if the State Department isn't responsible for protecting the lives of Americans abroad, who is? I submit that the questions raised by Mrs. Ryan and Miss Speier should be taken seriously, and answered respectfully. The State Department should be made to answer for its 'incompetence'."

Washington Post, November 28:
"There must also be a thorough investigation of what exactly happened in Jonestown...We must see if a State Department policy may be formulated at least to cover a similar contingency in the future."

San Francisco Chronicle, December 4:
"We are not persuaded that the State Department was at fault, but the public is entitled to hear the facts brought out and judged."

Baltimore News-American (Hearst), November 22:
"...we question whether it (State) had done even an adequate job of assessing the true picture of the conditions in Jonestown. This is why we support...an inquiry into the State Department role."

Salt Lake City Tribune, November 5:
"...it (State) doesn't try hard enough in aiding Americans in trouble abroad."

The following columnists and papers took the position that the Department did all it legally could do without violating First Amendment rights or infringing on the sovereignty of Guyana:

John P. Roche, Philadelphia Bulletin, San Diego Union, Cincinnati Enquirer, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, and Oklahoma City Journal.

Sentiments typical of this group were expressed by:

John P. Roche, Washington Star, December 11:
"...hard as it is for me to defend the State Department, the message on Jonestown is 'lay off': Everything that could legally be done was done."

Wall Street Journal, December 8:
"But this time the critics are accusing the department of negligence for not having seen something that in fact none of us could have imagined. If State had behaved differently, you can be sure there would have been howls about the U.S. Government's harassment of the religiously peculiar."

Los Angeles Times, November 28:
"What is lacking in this clamor (that the U.S. Government should have intervened) is any reasonable suggestion as to the government's legal basis for intervention into affairs essentially beyond its control and proper authority."

Oklahoma City Journal, November 29:
"Some critics blame the State Department and FBI for not having investigated the Jonestown colony adequately and warning of its murderous potential. But another scenario could be written whereby too-zealous scrutiny of such a situation, particularly in a location outside U.S. jurisdiction, could be construed as harassment of nonconformists."

Responsibility for Removing Bodies

The following papers took the position that the Department made the right decision on the disposition of the victims' remains:

Phoenix Republic, Des Moines Register, New Orleans Times-Picayune, Baltimore News American, Chicago Sun Times, and Milwaukee Journal.

A sentiment typical of this group was expressed by:

Milwaukee Journal, November 29:
"Overall, the government seems to have done the necessary and decent thing."

The sentiment that the airlift costs should be recovered from the People's Temple was expressed by the New Orleans Times-Picayune, Phoenix Republic, Baltimore News American, and Chicago Sun Times.

On December 2, the Sun Times expressed a sentiment typical of this group:

"It seems only decent...that U.S. dead--especially in so grisly and sad a case--are returned to U.S. soil to rest. But certainly the government should try to recover the airlift costs."

Of the 65 papers that PA regularly monitors, 29 frequently comment on foreign affairs. Among this group, editorials on the Department's role were not published by the following 16:

Baltimore Sun, Boston Globe, Little Rock Arkansas Gazette, Louisville Courier-Journal, St. Louis Globe-Democrat and Post-Dispatch (both on strike since November 20), Atlanta Journal, Dallas News, Dallas Times-Herald, Houston Post, Chicago Tribune, Minneapolis Tribune, Oklahoma City Oklahoman, Portland Oregonian, and the Seattle Times.

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